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Viewpoints

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On Being A Jewish Writer In Quebec

By Victor Teboul

Writing constitutes above all a tradition: by writing, one becomes part of a specific society just by using a particular language or idiom. One places oneself within a certain sociological context which one proceeds to question. Being a Jewish writer in France or in the United States is certainly not the same as in Quebec. One can of course abstract oneself from the Quebec context, but for me it is a question above all of inserting oneself within this tradition; I must also say that, at the moment, I prefer the essay form to fiction. This is because the Quebec novel does not appear to reflect the reality of daily life as well as does the essay, which embodies within its form the cultural and political realities of Quebec.

Less lyrical than the novel, although lyricism is no stranger to it, the essay remains in my view, the intellectual genre "par excellence". The writings of Olivar Asselin, Jean-Charles Harvey, Pierre Vadeboncoeur, and Hubert Aquin, played a major role in influencing me. What impressed me most in their work was their defense of liberty; what attracted me to them was the strength of their convictions, the power of their thoughts, which were completely opposed to the ideological currents of their times. This was not surprising since I discovered that their ideas evoked analogies between their condition as French Canadians and that of Diaspora Jewry; this was particularly true of Hubert Aquin and Pierre Vadeboncoeur where I found echoes of Albert Memmi and in particular of his "Portrait of a Jew".

VICTOR TEBOUL

Victor Teboul is the Executive Director of the Canada-Israel Committee for Quebec and the Editor of Jonathan, its French-language magazine. Teboul's most recent work, soon to be published in Montreal, is on liberalism in Quebec.

Further in the past — still a recent past — Asselin and Harvey discovered in the Jew, a model to emulate. But if one places oneself in the context of the time — the turn of the century for Asselin, the 1930's for Harvey — the conception one had of another being's cultural difference, specifically of the Jew, is very revealing. The pejorative aspect commerce had acquired signified not necessarily a certain antisemitism, but more a refusal to establish a relationship with persons of different backgrounds. The perception of business entrepreneurship determined the kind of "rapport" one wished to establish with a stranger. This was not accidental, for this attitude was confirmed by Benjamin Sulte, historian of Three Rivers, who was known for his genuine interest in the Hart family, and who favored the industrialization of which they were the forerunners.

POINTS OF REFERENCE

To get to know Quebec and its thinkers, I had to empathize with their ideals; I also wished to discover the perception they had of me. I undoubtedly needed points of reference. This explains the publication five years ago of "Mythe et Images du Juif au Quebec", a work which posed, — admittedly in a rather blunt manner — questions which had seldom been asked in Quebec. Had there been, then, one year after the Parti Quebecois took office, a blacklist of ethnic leaders, I assure you I would certainly not have been defined as a "souverainiste "!

It was not permissible then to question the stubborn stereotypes which appeared to be polluting the atmosphere of normal relations that should exist between Jews and non-Jews. My attempt was perceived in certain nationalist circles as a brutal attack against the "Quebecois" soul, against a certain idyllic purity of the Quebecois — at least that was the conception which prevailed among those who modelled and propagated Quebec's culture. These were precisely the circles I had in mind while writing this book.

UNACCUSTOMED TO CHALLENGE

It must be admitted that the Quebecois intelligentsia was not accustomed to being challenged by an individual who did not come from their own milieu. It would undoubtedly have been less disturbing to them had I limited myself to describing imaginary or real ill treatment undergone in a totalitarian and consequently antisemitic regime, and had I evoked long periods of confinement in Egyptian jails for lack of Siberian experiences. I discovered — as did probably my readers — that there was a price to my integration, and that any intelligent person could not really integrate into Quebec's society without also questioning his new milieu. The Quebecois essayists whose work I had read and studied had achieved their objective; they had successfully transmitted to me their sense of questioning and continuity.

It was with this viewpoint that I also questioned the history of Quebec and some prevailing determinist interpretations. This questioning, which I continued during three years of research, resulted in my forthcoming work describing the revolutionary current which liberalism has represented in Quebec during the years preceding the Second World War. It was a mistake, in my view, to ignore the influence on the world of ideas, of a school of thought which vigorously opposed in Quebec the narrow nationalism of that period. Sounding the dissident undercurrent in Quebec which dared to distance itself not only from the federalist trend, but also and chiefly from the strong nationalist movement which has always dominated the cultural scene, is a very refreshing activity. Novelists such as Arsene Bessette and Albert Laberge in the 1910 decade, or Jean-Charles Harvey in the 1930's, and more recently authors Michel Morin and Claude Bertrand are stimulating examples of this dissidence.

While Quebecois society constituted for a long period an exotic anomaly in the North American scene, in a certain sense a dissident society, we must not overlook the fact that the society could not have survived unless it exercised great caution in its relationship with the outside world. Any overtures to foreign cultures could have influenced and modified its particular character. This was probably an instinctive necessary reaction, not atypical of minorities.

NATIONALIST GOVERNMENT

Also, the fact that a nationalist government took office, represented in my mind the overtaking of these hermetic tendencies and the possibility, hitherto unexplored, of discovering and recognizing our differences. I considered it significant that a Parti Quebecois Minister of Immigration would begin the study of Greek in order to better penetrate the Greek mentality of his constituents. This attitude meant a change in the electoral attitudes of Quebecois nationalists. The motive was undoubtedly political, but isn't polity a perfect place of interchange? Lionel Groulx, whose name graces so many public places in Montreal, the father of Quebecois nationalism, who personified the distrust of that period toward the outsider, this cleric, undoubtedly well versed in

gut to Winnipeg.

When the depression came, my father, like everyone else lost his job. One of the interesting things about our whole family situation is that everything has happened to

persons who profess other modes of being. I know that it was an accident that I was lucky enough to be born Jewish, but my sense of Jewishness is quite absolute; and my se .se of

inordinately the wonderful devotion to study and thought as a way of pursuing the unimaginable through the unknown, as a means of validating the intangible. The major

personally, I

epitome of Jewishness, but really I won't be until I am able to acknowledge all those hidden areas and come to terms with them.

On Being A Jewish Writer in Quebec

By Victor Teboul, Ph.D.

The following article appeared in Viewpoints, the Literary Supplement of the Canadian Jewish News, in May 1983. I had been appointed two years earlier to the position of Executive Director of the Canada-Israel Committee's Quebec Bureau, the principal Canadian Israeli lobby group, following the publication of my essay Mythe et images du Juif au Québec.

The essay denounced misconceptions about Jews and about Israel among Quebec literati. My mandate was to promote Israel among the French-Canadian elite. The task was not easy and if I could find the time to write about my 5-year involvement in attempting to explain Israel and its actions to Quebec society (the war in Lebanon broke out during my mandate), it could be very revealing in terms of the Jewish community's place in Quebec.

To fulfill my task I had, among other obligations, the responsibility to publish a French-language magazine which, following various consultations, I decided to name Jonathan, after Yonatan Yoni Netanyahu who had commanded the 1976 Israeli raid on Entebbe, where he died in combat. Unique in its format, Jonathan hit the newstands every month, except for a summer break. It attracted «la crème de la crème» of French-Canada's writers and intellectuals.

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Canadian Jewish News, April 12, 1984

Ted Greenfield, left, chairman of the Quebec-Israel Committee, presents Washington Israeli embassy official Benjamin Netanyahu with special bound copies of Jonathan. The French-language magazine, published by the Committee, is named for Netanyahu's brother, who was commander of the Entebbe raid.

During my mandate I learned that, although Israel can be characterized as a dynamic and self-critical society unequaled in the West, Jews in Quebec are oversensitive, because, among other reasons, the language and cultural barrier often cuts them off from the mainstream thinking of Quebec society and has a tendency to create misconceptions such as perceived antisemitic or anti-Zionist discourses, which in turn are exaggerated in Jewish minds.

Also, one should bear in mind that René Lévesque's Parti Québécois was then in power in Quebec, a government with which the Jewish community was not, to say the least, on the best of terms.

In the *Viewpoints* article, I tried to put forward to an English-speaking Jewish audience my perspective on Quebec as well as the intellectual background which contributed to my outlook as a Francophone author. I had not yet, at the time, published any novels.

The following text was originally a presentation I made as the Guest Speaker of the Jewish Book Month held in November 1982 at the Jewish Public Library.

Writing constitutes above all a tradition: by writing one becomes part of a specific society just by using a particular language or idiom. One places oneself within a certain sociological context which one proceeds to question. Being a Jewish writer in France or in the United States is certainly not the same as in Quebec, One can of course abstract oneself from the Quebec context, but for me it is a question above all of inserting oneself within this tradition; I must also say that at the moment, I prefer the essay form to fiction. This is because the Quebec novel does not appear to reflect the reality of

daily life as well as does the essay, which embodies within its form the cultural and political realities of Quebec.

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Further in the past — still a recent past Asselin and Harvey discovered in the Jew a model to emulate. But if one places oneself in the context of the time - the turn of the century for Asselin, the 1930s for Harvey, the conception one had of another being's cultural difference specifically of the Jew is very revealing, The pejorative aspect commerce had acquired signified not necessarily a certain anti-Semitism, but more a refusal to establish a relationship with persons of different backgrounds. The perception of business entrepreneurship determined the kind of "rapport" one wished to establish with a stranger. This was not accidental for this attitude was confirmed by Benjamin Sulte, historian of Trois-Rivières, who was known for his genuine interest in the Hart family, and who favored the industrialization of which they were the forerunners.

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It was with this viewpoint that I also questioned the history of Quebec and some prevailing determinist interpretations. This questioning, which I continued during three years of research, resulted in my forthcoming work describing the revolutionary

current which liberalism has represented in Quebec during the years preceding the Second World War. It was a mistake, in my view, to ignore the influence on the world of ideas, of a school of thought which vigorously opposed in Quebec the narrow nationalism of that period. (This work was published in 1984 : Le Jour. Émergence du libéralisme modern au Québec.)

Sounding the dissident undercurrent in Quebec, which dared to distance itself not only from the federalist trend, but also and chiefly from the strong nationalist movement which has always dominated the cultural scene, is a very refreshing activity. Novelists such as Arsène Bessette and Albert Laberge in the 1910 decade, or Jean-Charles Harvey in the 1930's, and more recently authors Michel Morin and Claude Bertrand are stimulating examples of this dissidence.

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Also. the fact that a nationalist government took office in 1976 represented in my mind the overtaking of these hermetic tendencies and the possibility, hitherto unexplored, of discovering and recognizing our differences. I considered it significant that a Parti Québécois Minister of Immigration (Gérald Godin) would begin the study of Greek in order to better penetrate the Greek mentality of his constituents. This attitude meant a change in the electoral attitudes of Québécois nationalists. The motive was undoubtedly political. but isn't polity a perfect place of interchange? Lionel Groulx whose name graces so many public places in Montreal, the father of

Québécois nationalism, who personified the distrust of that period toward the outsider, this cleric. undoubtedly well versed in ancient Greek, must have turned in his grave at the thought of one of his disciples having to learn modem Greek in order to make himself more easily understood in the country of Maria Chapdelaine. Did this not prove that, after all, everything could change in Quebec?

The necessary recognition of a difference, and the determining role it can play on the political chessboard, indicated at least that a nationalist MNA, later promoted to a minister, benefited from this democratic exchange between the Parti Quebecois and Montreal's pluralistic masses.

The nationalist movement had reached a new level. For while affirming the French identity of Quebec, was it not also discovering its heterogeneous character? Was it due to an irony of history or of the political power it has just acquired?

I am certain that the Montreal MNAs (members of the National Assembly of Quebec) of the Parti Quebecois know Quebec better today than when they were elected. Truly a milieu of exchange between people of different cultural backgrounds (one should read *Montreal Interdite* by Alain Medam), Montreal had for a long time been rejected by the French Canadian psyche. Politics, it seems, do affect collective dreams.

This undoubtedly explains why the municipal political scene of Montreal reflects more accurately the pluralistic dynamics of our North American cities. The three municipal parties easily surmount the linguistic and cultural differences which are too often the subject of debate in Quebec. The most recent municipal elections have clearly illustrated that the progressive forces in Montreal, those who strongly favor change and community action, come from the immigrant and Anglophone communities.

If the astute politician has good reasons to take into account the ethnic composition of his or her constituency — a natural dialectic in a continent populated by immigrants — it is quite a different matter in the realm of artistic representation. In the first instance, as we have noted, a necessary symbiosis is established, which is still lacking in the cultural scène.

At a recent colloquium organized by the "Institut d'Histoire de l'Amerique Française", I tried to communicate the difficulty I felt in attempting to make the history of Quebec my own. I said, essentially, that although I could effectively speak of my street, and my neighbourhood, I could not speak of my history when dealing with Quebec's history. This applies also to culture: not only that which is lived daily by Montrealers, but that which represents us, which is seen on television, in the cinema, in our daily newspapers and our novels. We must ask ourselves if certain books, like the one by Yves Beauchemin which is very popular today, entitled ‘Le Matou’, do not come to us directly from the 1930-1940 era, a period when foreigners represented all the evil influences which threatened the innocent and disarmed French-Canadian hero who came into contact with them.

Similarly, is not the world evoked by Yvon Deschamps in his monologues already "depassé"? In other words, this Quebecois culture, which he represents, is it not, in spite of itself, still full of all the elements of resistance toward America, which until now have characterized it and given it, to a certain extent, its specific identity?

When I think back to what attracted my parents to this continent, while already in the 1950's, in Egypt, they were thinking of Canada, I realize that it was a certain idea of America which brought us here. Despite our middle class values, a certain equality in the opportunities available to all, as well as the idea of individual initiative and entrepreneurship fascinated us. We, who had lived first under a monarch, well-disposed though he might have been toward

his middle-class, whatever its origin, and then under a dictator who mobilized his masses and exercised his power against foreigners, including Jews, we Alexandrians ardently longed for the America we already knew. For Alan Ladd, Clark Gable or Rita Hayworth represented so well America at the Sunday cinema.

But later, in Paris, in the late 1950s, in the great hall of the Chief synagogue of the Rue de la Victoire (which we called the "Cathedral"!), when we young Jews, refugees from Arab countries, met our co-religionists from America who were visiting France, we felt a culture-shock. The young women wore glasses shaped like birds' wings, the young men had short crewcut haircuts and wore baggy pants, and what's more, some of them were blond. Such encounters of the third kind were really the ultimate!

JUDAISM TRAUMATIZED

We, Mediterranean Jews, who bathed in the culture and languages of this part of the world, saw our Jewishness as being open to and in perpetual relationship with other cultures. The Montreal Jewish community that I discovered in the 1960's seemed to me to be the exact opposite of that which I had known during my adolescence in France and earlier in the countries of the Middle East.

Compared to American Judaism, multi-faceted and rich in philosophical reflection, Montreal's Judaism seemed to have been traumatized by the Quebecois' affirmation of their identity to the point of polarizing itself into extreme positions — either of closing in upon itself, or of defining itself solely in the context of this Quebecois affirmation.

It would evidently be a little too easy to see in the Sephardim a new expression of Jewish identity because of their assertiveness, as well as because they have been less traumatized by their contacts with non-Jews — at least in their recent past. Nevertheless, one must forcibly close his eyes not to realize that the Sephardim have

established in Quebec a new relationship with the Quebecois, fundamental in my view, which is a rapport between equals. It is also not surprising that they have assumed today the leadership of French Jewry, whether in the realm of contemporary cultural or spiritual thought, as exemplified by essayist Shmuel Trigano or, by the Chief Rabbi of France, Rene Sirat, who is himself a Sephardic.

Consequently, in France today there is a new much clearer definition of the Jewish identity, chiefly due to the influence of the Sephardim. That the term "Jew" is once again being used in preference to the term 'Israélite', long considered more acceptable in post-Napoleonic French society, since it was more self-effacing — this is in itself significant in a country noted for its tenacious and recurrent anti-Semitism.

In Quebec, however, because of linguistic differences, being Sephardic often means being given the role of intermediary between the authorities and the diverse organizations of a largely Anglophone Jewish community. However privileged or serious this responsibility may be, it does not correspond to the role of leadership, because of the lack of involvement of the Sephardim in the large Jewish organizations. The true leaders are recruited, to use the new Quebecois terminology, from among the "old stock" Jewish families. I will not elaborate on the relationship between the Sephardim and the Ashkenazim — some of my best friends are Ashkenazim!

NEW MAJORITY

Being Sephardic in Montreal also means being exposed to an ignorance of the Sephardic fact among certain American Jewish intellectuals. This ignorance manifests itself in the great American newspapers and even in such prestigious periodicals as the New York Times Magazine and the New York Review of Books. What upsets these intellectuals most is that the Sephardim in Israel constitute today a new majority who demographically and

culturally have greatly modified the socialist ideology which has for so long characterized that country.

That Oriental Jews elect Menahem Begin and acclaim him as "Melekh lsrael" - King of Israel - this is a far cry from the egalitarian ideal of socialism, which is after all a western ideal the kind liberally inclined intellectual Jews in the U .S. are nostalgically longing for. That the Sephardim, more traditional than the political establishment who held power until the arrival of Begin, produced a sharp break in this ideology - this was undoubtedly intellectually difficult to absorb. That furthermore, these Sephardim take seriously every word uttered by their enemies, under whom their parents lived as minorities (we should read to that effect Albert Memmi's illuminating work *Juifs et Arabes*), is admittedly disconcerting to western-imbued thinkers who wish to believe in the miraculous effects of dialogue .

Today, more than ever, to be a Jew is to be a dissident, that is, to be a provocation to conformity, to proclaim openly the right to be different. And within Judaism the Sephardic branch is the living example of this difference. The convergence of the Ashkenazic and Sephardic branches of Judaism, not only in France and in North America, but above all in Israel is an eloquent illustration of the complementary dimension each one offers to the other. Their converging evolution into the modem Israeli identity serves to confirm, if need be, the indissoluble unity and strength of the Jewish people.

If it is true that being Jewish is a provocation to conformism and homogeneity, it is even truer for the Israeli, whose very existence is a permanent danger to totalitarian regimes, since it represents a clear model of self-determination to all minorities, beginning with the minorities within the Arab countries. When supposedly moderate Arab intellectuals, right here in Montreal and in Quebec City, in so-

called academic forums publicly declare that Israel prevents Arab unity, one can understand the symbol which the existence of Israel represents not only for Jews, but for all minorities in the world.

Writing, I have learned, involves a serious responsibility. The old adage "Words disappear, but writing endures", is even truer today when every word spoken on the electronic media passes for the slower and profounder way, still retains its influence.

Writing, then for me, means essentially creating ties between Jew and non-Jew; it also means questioning pre-conceived ideas and truncated perceptions. It is, finally, a means of strengthening, in times of crisis, the bonds that tie us together as a community and as a people.

"On Being A Jewish Writer in Quebec" was first published in *Viewpoints*, the Literary Supplement of the *Canadian Jewish News*, May 26, 1983, p. 3.

Click below to hear Quebec Premier René Lévesque quoting Victor Teboul on the significance of the Parti Québécois's rise to power, during one of the Premier's first public meetings with Montreal's Jewish Community (in English):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mrbze7ujrts

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Posted on this site on May 9, 2025.